

**“VACCINATE WITH CRISIS SERUM”–
METAPHORS OF SICKNESS IN THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE
OF WEIMAR GERMANY**

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This article is a close reading of representative examples of sickness metaphors in political discourse in interwar Germany. After relating the issue to the theoretical assumptions of the history of concepts and discourse analysis with regard to the term “crisis”, it shows that even though the authors had different political views, they shared imageries of illness in order to engage with the contemporary crisis of German politics and society.

On the recent occasion of a state visit in the course of the current Euro-zone debates, the German Chancellor was assured by her Italian counterpart that his country was no longer “a possible source of infection” for Europe (Washington Post, “Italy’s Monti”). Whereas the characterization of current economic affairs as “critical” seems to be ubiquitous and unquestioned, it seems odd that a medical metaphor has obviously been chosen to function as an interpretative approach to this crisis.

Contemporaries of interwar Germany with its manifold economic, social and political problems culminating in the “total crisis” of 1930-1933 (Peukert 247) have framed their views on these overlapping crises in similar forms. But what purpose did metaphors of sickness serve within the Weimar discourse of crisis? Can they be connected to certain political currents? And why did (and do) authors resort to these metaphors in the context of “crisis”?

1. CRISIS AND SICKNESS

The ubiquity of the term “crisis” in political discourse, its past and present use and the impression that there is a core substance to it which needs no further explanation (however vague its use) serves to illustrate the importance of how critical the engagement with such a central

concept is. Yet again, it points to the social construction of reality (Berger/Luckmann). The projects of *Begriffsgeschichte* (history of concepts) and, similarly, the Cambridge School of intellectual history (most notably represented by Skinner and Pocock) have advocated including in their analysis of basic concepts the entire realm of “political languages” and not only an unchanging canon of political thought (cf. Landwehr 40). As Reinhart Koselleck has shown in his article on crisis in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (Basic Concepts in History), “crisis” is just such a basic concept: it is an “inescapable and irreplaceable part of the political and social vocabulary” (Richter and Richter 345).

It is noteworthy that a link to sickness can be found in the very term of crisis and in its etymology. Ever since the ancient Greeks, the term contained a medical aspect (Koselleck, *Crisis* 360). The definition of crisis as a situation in which a necessary decision has to be made but has not yet been made, leaving open what the outcome could be (Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis* 127), always relates to the course of illnesses and their decisive phase, or turning-point. Moreover, according to Gerhard Masur, the medical meaning is the oldest one (590). This tradition continued well into early modern European history, then experienced a revival in nineteenth- and twentieth-century psychology and psychiatry. During that period the meaning was borrowed from outside the discipline, again with the idea of culmination, the moment in therapy when contradicting elements come into conflict and provoke a climactic point – with a salutary or fatal outcome (Schönpflug 1242).

The writer and educationalist Horst Grüneberg stressed this culminating element in 1929, stating that “one becomes skeptical of crisis as a steady state; for there is only a crisis resulting in death or life” (Grüneberg 597). This shows that the medical meaning of crisis was still present in Weimar discourses. Of course there had been a centuries-old tradition of body analogies in political language, epitomized in the idea of the body politic which could also be subject to illness. But after the traumatic break of 1918, “crisis” was now used in a significantly different way. For the first time the language of degeneration which so far had been used to stigmatize other peoples or groups (above all the Jews) was applied to the defeated German nation suffering from post-war instability (Föllmer, *Volkskörper* 42-47).

In his article on the narrative of crisis in Weimar Germany, Rüdiger Graf has demonstrated that the use of the term in this period was not only

explicitly related to the medical meaning but also quite often emphasized the “temporarily stressful, but ultimately positive development towards the recovery of health” (Graf 602). This reading opens up a different understanding of Weimar democracy. Unlike mainstream historical accounts of Weimar, which read like “extraordinary catalogues of horrors” (Fritzsche 29), contemporary assessments did not see the first German republic as being doomed from the start. Graf has brought forward two further arguments: firstly that the discourse of crisis represents an almost Manichaeian decisionism (Graf 605-606), and secondly that the historiographical use of crisis as a “*passepourtout* notion to explain other developments” (Graf 593) has obfuscated our view on contemporary debates and complicated its scholarly use today. To borrow a computing metaphor, this equates to a conflict between source language and target language. It seems fruitful to extend Graf’s analysis to the metaphors of sickness. The use of dichotomic metaphors such as sickness versus recovery, life versus death or deterioration versus healing might help to understand the notion of openness inscribed in contemporary discourses which almost certainly related to “real” social phenomena, or in terms of a discourse analysis inspired by Foucault: practices and apparatuses.

A discourse analytical approach to the intertwined notions of sickness, social medicine and eugenics in Weimar Germany inevitably needs to include these practices. This work has been undertaken elsewhere in respect to the issue of the wounded and disabled veterans (cf. Kienitz), the growing debate on suicide (cf. Föllmer, *Suicide and Crisis*) or using the surprisingly similar example of interwar Britain (cf. Overy)

For reasons of space I shall confine my analysis only to the related *énoncés* or discursive behaviours. Specifically, I will seek to indicate how sickness metaphors were used as statements within the discourse of crisis in the Weimar Republic, the way intellectuals and political actors reacted to and interpreted medical-biological findings and thus related to the wider political context of the time.

In his book on the discourse of normality Jürgen Link has referred to the discursively constructed borderline between a supposed normality and the realm of sickness and psychopathy – “‘cracks’ in meaning and the failure of hermeneutics point to ‘bodies’ and sickness” (Link, 90). I shall argue that Weimar intellectuals tried to fill the cracks and give meaning to the crisis they experienced using illness metaphors.

2. A SICK REPUBLIC?

Although giving only a punctual impression, the following examples of sickness metaphors form a representative cross-section of the respective discourse. Despite their different standpoints and topics, the authors share common rhetorical strategies with respect to these metaphors. They are concerned with disparate topics such as the impact of modernity on the individual and collective psyche, the decline of urbanity and the ramifications of the given economic situation—all quite fiercely disputed issues in the Weimar Republic.

Among the circles of the antidemocratic and nationalist intellectual movement of the Conservative Revolution, Edgar Julius Jung was one of the prominent figures. Though only in his early thirties, he had already established a career as political assassin and unsuccessful *Reichstag* candidate before he turned to journalism and gained fame and notoriety for his 1927 book, *Die Herrschaft der Minderwertigen* (The Rule of the Inferior). Here Jung explores the subject of the *Volkskörper* (literally the people's body; i.e. the body politic) which he sees as deeply affected, "sickened," by misguided governmental policies (*Bevölkerungspolitik*), and in a wider sense, by the vices of individualism and rationalism:

Demographic policies aim at the preservation and strengthening of the people's body [which] as a whole has been neglected and even fell ill. The German social doctors can be compared to the medical expert who only pays attention to the improvement of the limbs but forgot to take care of the decline of vital forces of the body as a whole. It is a new thing to understand the people as a living body whose state of health and vital force need the most diligent care. It is then quite clear that as a consequence the individual limbs will thrive and be fit for work. The difference in conceptions of maintaining the health of the people's body is already quite clear in the attention the proponents of social policy pay to signs of weakness in the people's body. ... This is the last chance to help; because the changes that have already taken place in the structure of the people have already severely damaged its body. (226-227)

Jung is not only aware of using corporeal or illness metaphors, he also sees their benefits; for him only those who share a holistic view of the body politic can understand and solve Germany's problems. The republican "social doctors" are being criticized for not recognizing this holism, which is characteristic for the Conservative Revolution, and these

their basic assumptions taken as false. It soon becomes clear what Jung means by “individual limbs” and what he means as regarding the related failed social policies:

It might be a progress of the healing arts if severely disabled cripples and terminally ill people are being kept alive. But if an inflated medical care leads to artificially maintaining weak, sick and inferior life while the superior is neglected, it is a legitimate question whether physically, spiritually and economically the forces of the people’s body are weakened. (267-268)

This reveals that Jung did not stop at a biologically motivated analysis of social policies. The political objectives that he aimed at the whole of the people’s body quite concretely proposed a “curative treatment of the diseased people’s body.” By metaphorically extending a limited healthcare-related question to the body politic the issue becomes a political problem: “The people’s body as a whole has fallen ill.”

Jung’s comments on how to take care of the disabled appear already remarkably close to the National Socialist programme of ‘extermination of life unworthy of life’, but yet they have to be seen within an earlier context of eugenics and racial hygiene in the Weimar Republic. As early as 1920, Karl Binding and Alfred Hoche discussed these issues in their book, *Die Freigabe der Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens*. But whereas Binding and Hoche had been judicial and medical experts respectively, Jung’s example shows how someone who was far from being a specialist in eugenics nevertheless advocated such issues. However, it is no coincidence that Jung as a representative of a rightist intellectual movement takes the floor as his agenda is clearly political. The “rule of the inferior” also refers to the democratic elites. Thus the idea of social sickness also serves the purpose of discrediting the republic of the “November criminals,” deploring its alleged failure to cope with the manifold political and economic problems and showing the solutions of a future Germany.

Contemporary considerations did not always have to focus on the whole body of the people as sick but rather on its specific (body) parts. As another key figure of the young conservative movement, the 32-year-old editor of the influential journal *Die Tat*, Hans Zehrer, wrote (under the pseudonym of Erwin Ritter) on the crisis of the metropolis:

This is the reality of crisis. One enters this big city and immediately knows: this city is sick, it lives in fever, angst-ridden, it throws itself

around... It is like a big contagion which affects everyone. ... An army of newsagents shouts: Crisis! Thousands of bookshops spread the word (633).

Here, crisis and sickness are directly coupled. It is hardly surprising that the example of the big city is chosen. Only there, in the unhealthy narrowness of the slums, can the contagion spread – this image is commonplace since Robert Koch, whose language itself is full of quite problematic metaphors (cf. Hänseler). For certain, Zehrer's sympathetic readers will have denoted his loathsome intention. For him the big city, presumably Berlin, represented all the problems of modernity which were in itself essential for the crisis – as opposed to the countryside which “does not know anything about crisis” (632). This is a foreseeable dichotomy especially for a conservative for whom the countryside represented the premodern counterpart in which one could take refuge. But no matter how dire this prospect might seem the slightly hopeful outlook can be read as the typically ambiguous, sometimes even optimistic notion of crisis: “The fever which shakes the big city has released the body's defences in it... The people's community [*Volksgemeinschaft*] is growing day by day” (637). For Zehrer, the turning point has already arrived: no matter how bad the infection had been, now antibodies are being generated. Here lies the metaphorical bridge to the *Volksgemeinschaft* which, for a leading right-wing intellectual, can only be in sharp contrast to the fragmented *Gesellschaft* (society) of Weimar Germany – to put it in Ferdinand Tönnies's famous and influential categories. Moreover, it is important to emphasize the moment in which Zehrer wrote this, November 1931. For the rightwing Young Turks of the *Tat* circle, Weimar's time was up; their future seemed to have almost begun.

Another example of coupling ambiguous notions of “crisis” with metaphors of sickness can be found in the works of the psychologist Fritz Künkel. Trained as a medical doctor before 1914, Künkel lost an arm in battle and therefore retrained as a psychotherapist after the war, for some time under the famous psychotherapist Alfred Adler (Siebenhüner 134). Not only did he later run a successful practice in Berlin, he also started writing psychological and self-help literature. One of these books was published in early 1933 under the title *Krisenbriefe* (Crisis letters - the relationship between economic crisis and character crisis). By using only one-to-one correspondence alone with his patients, Künkel tried to help

them with their mental problems or even illnesses – and although he was aware of the potential shortcomings of this “psychotherapy by letter,” he was no less optimistic about initiating a turnaround in his patients.

For Künkel, a direct relationship existed between the political and personal crises:

Through the hardships and sorrows of the present, people fall into mental or physical suffering which can only be overcome by emotional development. The external crisis turns into an internal one (5).

This only touches upon a commonplace already shared by social scientists and psychologists at that time: that an exacerbated economic situation drives people into desperation and emotional stress. The individual psychic problems or even mental disorders of his patients were thus organically embedded into political context. As a doctor, Künkel hoped for both individual and social recovery at the same time.

The external crisis can function as a motor for internal crises which in turn, appearing in large numbers, can bring about the overcoming of the external crisis in political, economic and cultural terms” (6).

On crisis, the tables are turned: firstly the individual patient is set up with psychological aid, thus he is enabled to overcome his emotional crisis. If this process was projected in to a large scale, even the political crisis could presumably be vanquished. Mental illness might have been an individual phenomenon, even a frequent one, but overcoming it was a collective action bearing political potential. Therefore for him potential recovery required not only a certain individual effort but also an accompanying “kind of cultural front of unity which supports the healing process” (264).

Clearly, the idea of the *Volksgemeinschaft* is again apparent even without being mentioned. Only this biologically imagined community can bring about healing and recovery. Quite evidently that leaves little space for reluctance or disobedience:

The development of the individual is brought about by the development of the general public. Anyone who falls behind, perishes. Anyone who joins in, gets well (63).

Like many of his contemporaries, the fate of the youth was a matter of concern for Künkel. He pinned his hopes on a future generation of Germans and even went so far as to consider it possible to make the youth immune to crisis:

If we succeeded in vaccinating the youth with crisis serum so that it will not perish but become immune, then we will soon be able to exercise all measures against all crises. World history would have reached a provisional goal. (5-6).

Again we see a relocation of political solutions into the future. Society may be emotionally distraught, but the possibility of mass change and healing might eventually lead to a bright future ahead. Künkel's political views might have been optimistic up to the point of naiveté – but that also made it easier for him to welcome the Nazi takeover and to rise to a leading position within the new National Socialist psychotherapy. Hence, it was not only intellectuals who freely used language of the medical sciences to examine social and political aspects. Here we see how metaphors could also work in the opposite direction, from medical or psychological debates into political discourses, with doctors feeling their expertise (or their role as public intellectual) allowed them to transfer their insight into political proposals. In a Foucauldian sense, this further entangled expert knowledge with power. Thus Künkel's case shows how a psychologist (as just one example of a medical/scientific expert) could see himself not only as an individual healer but as a professional advisor to society and politics, or to put it another way: as a manager of crisis.

Finally, two examples from the core political sphere will prove illuminating. At the 1931 national convention of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), the high-ranking delegate, longtime trade union functionary and economist Fritz Tarnow stated programmatically:

We are now standing at the sickbed of capitalism, not only as a diagnostician, but also as doctor willing to help, or as a cheerful heir who cannot wait for the end and would like to accelerate the process with some poison. This picture shows our whole situation. [...]

This double role, doctor and heir, is a damned difficult task. The patient himself does not arouse our pity so much, but rather the masses standing behind him. When the patient's breath rattles, the masses are starving. If we know the medicine for it, even if we are not convinced that it might really cure the patient, but at least ease the deathly rattle, so that the masses outside have enough to eat again, then we will administer the medicine and for the moment we will not think of us as being the heir, waiting for his rapid end. (Tarnow 45-46)

Tarnow, also member of the *Reichstag*, pointed out the dilemma of the SPD in the Weimar Republic: the Social Democrats did not care about

the patient named capitalism (on the contrary, he sees them also as legacy hunter), but rather about the consequences that his death would have for the masses which, *nota bene*, are not included in the complex web of metaphors. The accompanying image of the heir points to future expectations. It is the future which is depicted positively, a post-capitalist and thus post-Weimar future, that Tarnow is yearning for. His dilemma was that in order to approach this future, the German working class would have to pay too high a price. And only reluctantly he seemed to accept, just as the SPD had during in the historical compromise of 1918, that the patient had to get his medicine, at least as long as the masses would have to suffer from his demise. Tarnow furthermore knew that in the critical situation of Germany's economic and political system in 1931, the role of the SPD could only be that of the doctor in order to save parliamentary democracy. Even if he might have secretly wished for more decisiveness, he certainly did not dare to tell the party conference.

Another moderate left-wing politician who employed a metaphor of sickness was Otto Braun, the Social Democratic minister-president of the then largest German state, Prussia. Himself psychically and physically exhausted by the demands of his office, he wrote in a letter to his friend and doctor, Raphael Friedeberg:

The German people are in a desperate situation. Like a sick person who consults many doctors and tries out many treatments, it finally runs to the quack in sheer despair – just like this, millions are now succumbing to national socialist demagoguery. (Braun 1932)

At the point of writing this, in May 1932, Braun was at his wits' end. For over a decade he had tried and partly succeeded in transforming Prussia from the heartland of the Wilhelmine monarchy into a republican stronghold. He seems to concede that the solutions and prospects he and his party offered were not indisputably the best. But he is certain that Nazi propaganda and promises constitute no proper alternative: their expertise is not to be taken seriously, their medicine useless – a dangerous cure for a gravely ill patient. His disappointment in the face of the electorate's choice of the placebo over the remedy reveals the helplessness of many democratic politicians in the crucial year of 1932.

Here we see that the use of sickness metaphors was not only limited to the generation of those actively involved in the World War (Tarnow did, Braun did not participate in the war). Furthermore the last quotes reveal that sickness metaphors were not only used by conservative or nationalist

actors but also by Socialists and Marxists, especially when it came to associating both metaphors and crisis with capitalism (Graf 609). It shows how deeply rooted the ideas of social sickness and recovery from crisis were amongst many Weimar intellectuals.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

By taking a short *parcours* through various manifestations within Weimar public discourse, I have illustrated that, in contrast to popular belief, sickness metaphors were not only used by conservative or nationalist thinkers. Jennifer Kapczynski has shown for post-1945 German discourses that “just as ‘crisis’ proved a fruitful conceptual framework for both Left and Right, notions of collective health [and sickness] remained ... available for use by both progressive and conservative causes alike” (14). This certainly applies to the Weimar case as well. The fact that even staunch Republicans such as Otto Braun made use of such metaphors might contribute to a recent trend of “reinject[ing] a sense of contingency into our picture of the Weimar Republic” (Ziemann 560).

Images of illness appear similar to, or even conjoined with the modern usage of “crisis” and its distinct lack of precision and concreteness, and the coexistence of ambivalent meanings. They have been used in discourse to “fit the uncertainties of whatever might be favoured at a given moment” (Koselleck, *Crisis* 399), not least because of the dynamic character of metaphors. No matter how ubiquitous the term crisis was, its ambivalent and often deliberately vague notion seems to have called for a more palpable, experientially grounded language. The entirely inconsistent imagery of sickness with its wide potential of “alive” (as opposed to conventional, dead) metaphors could provide this language.

But the use of metaphors was by no means coincidental or arbitrary; as has been demonstrated it served quite different purposes. Yet it was always about describing the present situation as “sick”, i.e. defective or at least improvable. Furthermore, the dichotomy of illness versus health in political discourse served the purpose of showing alternatives which were visualized by the images of recovery and remedy. Thus phrasing the debates along the lines of life and death contributed to widespread feelings of doom and the above-mentioned sense of decisionism. More than the crisis *passepartout*, these metaphors could assume impact as strategic choices in the political arena.

It was the sense of diffusity, unease, of feeling unwell with and within the crisis which made authors resort to viewing the republic in terms of sickness. The multiplication effect of the quoted authors, all of whom (except Braun) were writing for or talking to the public, either had the clear intention of, or at least might have contributed to, weakening the frail foundations of the first German republic. Not only were “the metaphors cleverer than the author” (G.C.Lichtenberg), they were sometimes even more dangerous.

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